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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant activities undertaken by members of small college speech departments has been the development of the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College. This paper reviews six aspects of this curriculum: (1) the "statement of domain"; (2) iterdisciplinary aspects; (3) questions of methodology; (4) changes in certain of the courses listed; (5) the role of communication theory; and (6) faculty preparation for staffing such a program. Among the conclusions is the following: a clearer articulation of the field's "domain" is needed. This articulation needs to consider interdisciplinary and multi-methodological aspects of the discipline. Thought should be given to replacing several of the courses with others more reflective of the central ideas of the discipline (specifically, are oral interpretation and voice and diction more central to the curriculum than communication theory, listening, and multi-cultural diversity?) Finally, ongoing opportunities for faculty development in the content areas of the discipline need to be provided. (SM)

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Four Years Later: Rethinking the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum

a position paper by

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Four Years Later: Rethinking the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum

Next to the establishment of the Committee on Small College Speech Programs itself, the most significant activity undertaken by members of small college speech departments has been the development and endorsement of the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College. The curriculum, however, was developed some four years ago, and we all know that over a four year period a person's understanding of a curriculum grows and changes. It is now time to rethink that curriculum using our experiences of the past four years, and to make the transition from a "freshman class" of communication professionals considering the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum for the first time to a class of Master's students reflecting upon it....We'll no doubt develop the Ph. D.'s perspective in a few years' time...

Based on my experience of implementing The Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in two different departments, advising three institutions formally as an outside consultant, and responding informally to questions and conversations of a variety of colleagues, there are several aspects of the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum which I believe we need to address, or address again. They include:

1) the "statement of domain"
2) interdisciplinary aspects of the curriculum
3) questions of methodology
4) changes in certain of the courses listed
5) the role of communication theory, and
6) faculty preparation for staffing such a program

This panel is focused on issues of implementing the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, and implementation is an excellent place to begin our reconsideration of that curriculum. Every curriculum change that a department or program puts forth has to be approved by one or more persons from outside the discipline before it can be implemented at an institution. It is here that the "best laid plans," the creative solutions, the vision of a department, can falter most frustratingly. It is here that a speech communication department must spend too much of its time and energy. It is here that a faculty member in speech communication can grow the most discouraged.

We should not have to spend more time trying to explain to others just what it is that we do than we spend among ourselves determining what it is that we should do. However, I believe this is what too often happens. Conversations I have had with colleagues concerning curriculum development at their institutions have focused mainly on how to explain to others what communication "is" rather than facets of a program itself. Conversations with committees, faculty from other disciplines, and administrators both on my own campuses and at other institutions focus on what we might call "macro-questions" rather than "micro-questions." The discipline is examined, rather than the curriculum. If particular courses are examined and questioned--if they falter in committee--it is generally not because they are poorly developed courses. It is because their place in the discipline of communication, or the discipline itself, is questioned.

Until we can answer better for others macro-questions, our good responses to micro-questions will go unnoticed. Furthermore, there is little organized help available to persons seeking to provide answers to macro-questions about the discipline. We know what we do, although we may have trouble articulating it even among ourselves. We know that what we do has value, although we may have trouble describing that value even among ourselves. We know we can "do what we do" very well, but we often have trouble substantiating our quality to others--and such difficulties can give rise to self-doubt, defensiveness, and "disciplinary depression." Too often when we propose curriculum changes, even if they eventually pass, we feel like the Rodney Dangerfield of disciplines--getting no respect.

The "whole family" can become depressed. Our students too often feel self-conscious about their majors and unable to explain to their friends what the study of communication is all about. Their parents telephone us and ask us to explain what Suzie or Tommy can "do" with a communication major--while siblings of Suzie and Tommy, also attending liberal arts colleges and with majors in a variety of humanities and social science disciplines, are assumed to be able to "do" something....

Too often when we propose a curriculum change of any size, our discipline itself comes under scrutiny. This doesn't happen to historians, chemists, and political scientists. The threat of such scrutiny, and the energy it takes for an effective response, can discourage a department from proposing changes. The interaction of such scrutiny and campus politics can place a department at a disadvantage in the numbers and status games played through the medium of distribution or core-course requirements. And the difficulty of responding to such scrutiny contributes to the very real risk every small college speech communication department faces with the resignation or retirement of a faculty member.

While we should be open to examination, both from within and outside the discipline, until we face no more such scrutiny than do other departments on our campuses, we need a network to provide us with some assistance. We need ideas and language with which to respond. We who helped create the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College must help articulate that response.

Equally frustrating to Speech Communication departments is the assumption that what we "do" is public speaking, and what Suzie and Tommy will be able to "do" when they graduate is to speak either well or glibly, depending on the mood of the outsider making the comment and his or her evaluation of oral communication skill.

I don't want simply to play "ain't it awful" with you here today, and I know we can all swap stories of such frustrating moments in our lives--but the point is that resources are not available, at least in an organized fashion, within the discipline, the professional association, or the Small College Committee, to articulate what it is that we as a discipline "do," that our disciplinary contribution has value, and that we can do it very well. We don't always answer well to others that we are a discipline, that we have theory and research, that we may be different from other disciplines in certain ways, that we may not fit neatly into the divisional structure of some institutions. But, if we are to succeed in implementing any curriculum, the Hope curriculum or any other, we need to have such answers. If we don't have them now, we need to work on finding and expressing them.

You may be thinking "Sure, Bonnie, among ourselves we're going to define communication and justify it, when this discussion has gone on within and outside of SCA for years?" I, however, am thinking "Why not us?" We came together in a meaningful way to draft a statement of domain (which, by the way, we seem to think about far less

than the courses and content areas which we listed). And we came to agreement about a series of meaningful and coherent courses which, whether or not we adjust them here and there over the years to respond to disciplinary trends and emphases, are generally satisfactory to us and meet the needs of our diverse institutions. When we started that project we wondered if we would succeed, but we did. Now larger institutions are considering such questions, and various governmental and foundation reports are urging such consideration and coherence. We took the lead before, we can do so again. Furthermore, such questions are not so frequently posed to departments of speech communication on larger campuses. We are the ones who most often have to answer the questions, and we know the kinds of responses administrators and other disciplines on our smaller campuses expect to hear.

Our statement of domain reads:

> "The ideal curriculum in our discipline concerns the understanding and use of spoken language and associated behaviors in a variety of contexts.
>
> "As educators, we seek to assist people in becoming effective and ethically responsible communicators who can understand theoretical choices and who can design, express, interpret, and evaluate functional messages." (1985 report, The Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College)

We need to examine that statement as a basis of re-examining our curriculum recommendations, developing recommendations about distribution requirements and divisional affiliations on our campuses, and articulating "who we are" and the value of "what we do" for ourselves, our colleagues, our administrations, our students, and their parents...along with various readers of the Chronicle of Higher Education.... Do we today agree with our statement of domain? What meanings does it hold for us? What implications does it have for our departments, course offerings, research, and disciplinary development?

If it sounds as if I am calling for another conference, you are correct. I am doing so. Roger and Joe, as planners of the Hope College summer conferences, are exploring formats and emphases for future conferences. I hope they will consider the possibility of this kind of conference, along with their faculty development programs which have been outstanding and the instructional development sessions they are contemplating. A pre-conference, post-conference, or stand-alone Hope College summer conference on exploring and articulating the discipline of speech communication at the small college would be one way to address questions about our statement of domain. Remember, we began with that statement and then selected courses for the essential curriculum.

There is a second possibility for a conference, and this is one the Small College Committee might wish to address in its business meeting. We might have a pre-conference linked to next year's SCA convention. The Chicago location is central, and the one-day pre-conference format is one that other groups have used in the past. We might look into locations other than the Palmer House, either at area motels with conference facilities or on area campuses. A dozen or so of us, in a day of hard work, could do some interesting exploring of the domain of our discipline. We could also share writings of our own and materials we have found which are related to our discipline and which have seemingly helped clarify our discipline for committees and administrators on our campuses. Finally, we could organize better what it is that "we need to learn to articulate better" for ourselves and for others.

I could see one result to be a resource book--bibliography, selected readings, and writings of our own--which we and others could use when the need arose for explaining and validating the discipline. We seek such pieces now and find or prepare them individually, with little sharing or testing of ideas and probably much duplication of effort. A convention program the following year might also result. This would help disperse the results of the pre-conference and faculty members throughout SCA might find our thinking of value here as they have found our curriculum recommendations of value, regardless of the size of their campuses.

I believe our statement of domain itself needs rethinking. I'm not sure that we share an understanding of what it means, and I'm not sure that we are in general agreement about our meanings, but I'm very sure that we can say what we mean more clearly and elegantly.

Reconsideration of the statement of domain would lead into a discussion of the next two points I feel must be raised as we rethink the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum. They involve the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline and consideration of the methodologies we employ in our research.

Issues of implementing a curriculum in communication at a small college involve consideration of courses for inclusion among distribution or core-course requirements on most of our campuses. Many times committees and faculties seem willing to approve majors and individual courses, but when it comes to including courses within a particular division of the college for distribution credit, problems can arise. While campus politics obviously are a factor here--for class sizes and for the "pecking order" of departments on the campus--many people seem genuinely confused over the statement that a discipline could contain within it several methodological approaches. Humanities people know what their methodologies are, social scientists know what theirs are, our friends in theatre (often some of our best friends on campus, and those most willing to assist us) know what methodologies in the performing arts are. But many of those people see a multi-methodological approach to be no approach, just as some people confuse androgyny with undifferentiated gender.

Depending on how traditional, flexible, and political our campuses are, we may find ourselves connected to the fine arts because we began as joint departments whether or not we continue as such. We may find ourselves connected to the humanities if our institutions don't separate the arts and humanities as divisions. A few of us may find ourselves in the social sciences. A lucky few of us may find ourselves able to place particular courses into the division in which the course seems most appropriate, and not find ourselves placed into a division (or out of it) because of what someone else thinks it is that we do.

Often our introductory course is accepted for distribution credit, particularly if it is a public speaking course. To change that introductory course to a theory course is sometimes difficult. To have that theory course then count in the core can sometimes be impossible.

One reason for the development of the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, and for its formal endorsement by the SCA Committee on Small College Speech Programs, was to provide formal acknowledgement, and thus added credibility, to individual courses and to the composition of a major in communication. That curriculum could then be presented, when appropriate, to Deans and committees, to help explain and justify a department's specific proposal. We need to take the further step of assisting departments in their proposals regarding distribution or core-course credit.

The same combined thinking and organized resources which would help to describe and explain the discipline could help departments answer questions regarding the placement of the department and/or selected courses within a particular division of an institution. Our original curriculum statement sought to provide for flexibility to adapt to institutional differences and so should this second statement. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, and its multi-methodological approach, need to be articulated in such a way that they make sense to others on our campuses.

I believe also that we should reconsider several of the courses listed. The Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College includes the following courses or content areas:

Public Speaking
Interpersonal Communication
Small Group Communication
Understanding Mass Media (Media Effects on Society)
Organizational Communication
Persuasion
Argumentation and Debate
Rhetorical Analysis
Oral Interpretation
Voice and Diction (including the development of language abilities and the vocal mechanism)
Introduction to Human Speech Communication
Communication and Rhetorical Theory
Communication Ethics/Freedom of Speech/Communication Law(a broad overview)
Communication Issues (changing topics of current interest)
Senior Seminar (an integrated, upper-division course)
Practicum/Internship in Speech Communication
Independent Study

Five courses were endorsed as being required for the major: Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, Small Group Communication, Understanding Mass Media, and Rhetorical and Communication Theory. The concept of an integrative senior course or experience was also endorsed. (1985 report, The Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication at the Small College)

I agreed with those courses at the time. Now I would recommend some changes. When I ask myself "What courses and content areas are critical to an understanding of communication as an act and as a discipline?" I don't come up with all of those. When I ask myself "What understandings, abilities, and attitudes do I believe are critical for our students who graduate with majors in speech communication?" I have to add several others to the list.

We approached the building of the essential curriculum from a statement of domain, but when we moved to building our curriculum we thought in terms of courses. We also thought in terms of courses as they presently existed at our own or other campuses. And then we created a list.

At the third Hope College summer conference, Charles Berger of Northwestern University made a point in his keynote address which radically altered my thinking about communication and curriculum building. He reminded us that traditional offerings in communication focus on contexts and on differences in communication within the various

contexts. He called for a new approach, one which considers communication as concepts rather than contexts, one which looks at commonalities in communication whatever the setting and the number of people interacting. When I arrived at The College of Wooster into a new position, charged with guiding the department in significantly altering the curriculum which had been in place for some time, I arrived fresh from the Hope conference and Berger's words. (The Hope conference was literally en route for my furniture, husband, cat, and myself between Ripon and Wooster). When we began considering our new curriculum at Wooster, we started not by looking at courses, student outcomes, what had been offered before, what was offered at other places, what we could manage to teach.... We started by asking ourselves questions about communication itself--what were its central concepts? What was common about communication in all contexts? And, just as McLuhan suggested that the medium was itself the message, what were the effects of context that affected the concepts, meanings, and interaction within it?

That was our starting point. And we are very pleased with our conclusions. When we went back and checked, we had all the courses and content areas in the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum. But we also had a firmer sense of the discipline and a theoretical basis which form the core of our Wooster curriculum.

We did not throw out the contexts, we did not throw out courses in Persuasion or Understanding Mass Media. We divided our courses into three main types: concept courses, context courses, and focus courses. The concept courses are the theoretical underpinning, they emphasize what is common. The context courses (interpersonal, small group, public, and mass) look at the situations in which communication occurs and how those situations affect the nature of communication. The focus courses are upper-division specialty courses, largely for the majors, which enable them to explore particular aspects of the discipline. Because we are at The College of Wooster we have a significant research sequence as well; were we at another institution we would not have three or four research courses required of each major, but this is an example of adaptation of the curriculum to institutional mission and philosophy.

Our course outline looks like this:

Communication Theory and Concepts
- Introduction to Communication Studies
- Perception and Meaning in Communication
- Language and Symbols in Communication
- Interaction and Influence in Communication

Communication Contexts
- Dyadic Communication
- Small Group Communication
- Public Communication
- Mass/International Communication

Focus Courses
- Public Speaking
- Argumentation and Persuasion
- Seminar in Rhetorical Criticism

- Mass Communication Technology
- Language of Visual Communication
- Mediated Message Design

Communication of Literature
Organizational Communication
Freedom and Responsibility in Communication
Special Topics in Communication

Internship
Tutorial
Independent Study
A three or four course sequence of research/ independent study (a college-wide requirement for graduation)
A series of practica in applied communication

The department has a separate major in Communication Sciences and Disorders.

I describe this to you not to argue for our specific courses, but to argue for the approach we took: that of considering as a starting point in curriculum building the phenomenon, the process of communication, rather than courses or content areas for the major. If we as a group of communication professionals started there in rethinking the essential curriculum, not only would we have a series of lively and helpful discussions but I believe we would eventually eliminate at least two courses from our original course listing.

Sad as I would be to see it go, I cannot argue that an understanding of the performance of literature is central to understanding and improving one's role and responsibility as a communicator. I also cannot argue that a voice and diction course is of central importance. Understanding the development of language and aspects of speech production and reception can be taught as well or better in other courses in the curriculum. Aesthetic features of language can become aspects of other courses, as well.

Staffing courses in Oral Interpretation and Voice and Diction is very difficult, since both the areas of Performance Studies and Communication Sciences and Disorders are so specialized that they are seldom included in the usual graduate preparation. A few of us have a background in one or the other, acquired 20 or more years ago, but departments hiring now will have difficulty finding new Ph. D.'s who are such generalists as to include those areas within their academic preparation, unless the potential faculty members are specialists in those areas. Then they are so specialized as to be less appropriate for our other hiring considerations. The three disciplines of Speech Communication, Performance Studies, and Communication Sciences and Disorders have moved on, just as have Speech Communication and Theatre, into separate albeit complementary areas. While an understanding of the one can enhance an understanding of the other, such an overlap of understanding is not central or necessary.

I urge an addition to the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, however. The addition was considered briefly at the time the 17 courses were selected, but had no strong advocate at the time and I think we felt we included elements of such a course in other courses in the curriculum. I am referring to a course involving multi-racial, intercultural, or inter-ethnic communication. Gender and communication should be one perspective covered in the course.

Pam Cooper, in her keynote address for the Speech Communication Association of Ohio in September of 1988, cited three trends in education nationally to which speech communication programs can be especially responsive: teaching critical thinking, encouraging cooperative learning, and responding to multi-racial issues. Critical thinking

is a foundation for public speaking, argumentation, and persuasion courses; Jim Herrick could also probably make a case for its being included as one of the central concept courses undergirding the whole curriculum. Cooperative learning is a basis of interpersonal and small group communication, both of which are recommended among the five courses all majors should have taken. Nowhere have I heard, however, of a need to prepare our students to understand and relate to the diverse perspectives of a multi-racial, gendered society.

I think we made an error at the time in not including such a course in the essential curriculum, but it is not too late to correct our mistake. I think we did not say at the time, and would not say today "This isn't an important issue, it is not one we should address." I think we thought and said at the time, "Difference among people is a fundamental point in communication. I teach it every time I teach audience analysis, every time I teach a student to try to understand 'the other' in interpersonal communication." However, teaching a student that there are differences does not help the student understand the nature of the specific differences, nor how to cope with and effectively adapt to those differences. We made a special course/content area for communication responsibility because we believed that even though it was taught or implicit in all our courses it was a significant enough factor in communication as to deserve course consideration of its own. I believe that is also true of racial, ethnic, gender, and social class diversity.

Given the demographics of US population, our students are living in an increasingly diverse world; given the demographics of small college speech departments, many of our students spend their time with white classmates and white teachers studying content from a white perspective. We do a disservice to them, as well as to the discipline and to ourselves, if we do not acknowledge the importance of diversity in perspective and provide a means of better understanding the implications of such diversity for the field of communication, for communication majors, and for communication interaction itself.

With a give and take among courses and content areas included in the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, we need not expand the numbers of courses departments might seek to offer. Oral Interpretation and Voice and Diction can be replaced by a course or courses considering diversity in communication perspectives and an integrative approach to communication theory and concepts. In fact, the idea behind this latter course was articulated by the Communication Theory Subcommittee at the 1986 Hope summer conference in its description of the Introduction to Human Communication course which it recommended, and thus is already contained within the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum. (We might also consider including a course in understanding and improving listening in a variety of contexts, since this is another aspect of communication often given too little time in other communication courses).

Staffing such a curriculum, however, becomes a problem for implementing the essential curriculum. While on the one hand suggesting that we faculty no longer have to be able to teach oral interp and voice and diction, am I now suggesting that we must be able to teach intercultural communication, gender and communication, and class and race diversity??? Yes, I am. Whether or not we include such courses in the curriculum, we as communication teachers need to have that knowledge and sensitivity.

I've just completed, with the assistance of Kelli Holmes, a first major demographic study of small college speech departments. Faculties are one-third female, two-thirds male, taken across the board on small college campuses, but of 328 respondents, 324 of us are white. Given the effects of faculty role models in selection of majors on campuses, and it is those majors who become graduate students who become faculty members in the future, our small college speech communication faculties are going to stay white for some time.

This phenomenon eventually has an effect on the hiring of faculty, but it has an immediate effect on minority students' choice of majors, and on the selection of our courses by minority undergraduates. While we cannot change our individual races and genders, we can change our courses to include issues of race and gender. We can gain the specific understandings we need and then use our backgrounds in communication and our interpersonal sensitivity to bring perspectives of diversity into our classrooms, our curriculum, and our campuses themselves. If we don't, the skills, knowledge, and sensitivity we have as communication professionals will not be brought to bear on this issue; faculty members elsewhere on our campuses, in related disciplines such as psychology and sociology, and in minority studies programs will not only take the lead in teaching and considering issues of diversity, they will leave us out of the dialogue. It is a dialogue in which we should have a leading voice.

We need to make use of the resources of faculty development programs on our campuses to help prepare us to teach such areas, and for such preparation assistance would likely be forthcoming. We need to look to our national, regional, and state associations to provide resources and materials to assist us as we learn and practice new skills. We need to take advantage of the rich experiences of those among us who don't fit the national demographic pattern, who themselves are minorities, who teach on diverse campuses, or whose research and courses already focus in this area.

Our problems will be time management and willingness to learn, not the ability to do so. But these factors are present in every consideration for staffing which exists in a department seeking to implement The Essential Undergraduate Curriculum.

Those of us who have hired faculty recently know the obstacles we face, seeking faculty for the small college setting. We compete with larger institutions for salary, work load, and research resources; when candidates apply to our institutions we too often find Ph. D.'s who are specialists, not the generalists we need. However, I believe the qualities most important for a faculty member at a small college, and which should play a central role in staffing considerations, are flexibility, organizational ability, and a willingness to learn. These must be coupled with intelligence and adequate preparation, of course, but the sticking point for implementing the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum should not be whether or not one knows that particular content area. One should be willing and able to learn. Critical thinking and cooperative learning are two qualities central to our discipline; in order to add the needed perspective of diversity, along with any of the other content areas in the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, we need to bring those first two qualities to bear. Considerations of faculty background for staffing a small college speech communication program need to include more than academic preparation.

Those five points, then, constitute my rethinking of the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum, after four years of working with its implementation.

We need a clearer articulation of our "domain."

This articulation needs to consider interdisciplinary and multi-methodological aspects of the discipline.

We need to rethink as a group the courses we have included, and give serious thought to replacing several with others more reflective of the central ideas and needs of the discipline. Specifically, are Oral Interpretation and Voice and Diction more central to a curriculum in Speech Communication than communication theory, listening, and multi-cultural diversity? I don't believe they are, and our essential curriculum should say as much.

We need to consider staffing: providing ongoing opportunities for faculty development in the content areas of the discipline (which has been the focus of the third and fourth Hope College summer conferences), reaffirming our commitment to academic preparation in communication for all teachers of communication (a statement endorsed at the second Hope College summer conference), and seeking to instill and reward attitudes of flexibility and skill in organization as essential qualities of speech communication faculty at small colleges.

As we move toward these goals we move closer to the ideals behind the Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication.

For Further Information

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